

# IN THE POCKETS OF YESTERDAY'S PANTS:

Theory, practice, theory



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On my first day working in a writing center, back in 1992, I was in love. My composition instructor, Ms. Zink, had badgered me endlessly the previous semester to go apply for the job and I stubbornly refused. For weeks, she would ask, "Have you applied yet?" "When are you going to apply?" "You need to go apply for that tutor job." Until finally, as she returned our second-to-the-last paper of that semester, she stared me down and said quite clearly, "you go down and apply for that tutoring job or I will flunk you." She was smiling as she walked away, but I knew she was serious about what I should do. My classmates looked on with sideways glances; perhaps questioning why they were not invited to apply for what I now know was a coveted campus position.

I was not flattered. Her constant entreaties of me to be a tutor were a mistake. I had no idea what I was doing nor why I was successful. I did not have a sense of "efficacy" (Bandura 1989) so necessary for student success. I had, instead, an acute case of impostor's syndrome – I did not belong in college; my professors were grading me on a curve of pity, not merit; I simply was not as smart as anyone around me. Each time I turned in a test, a paper, a pop quiz, I knew I had failed. Some days, I had an overwhelming sense that I would be escorted off the campus, asked never to return. My grades told a different story, a reprieve from my ugly inner voice – until the next due date, the next exam. These irrational feelings are funny to me now. But college had always seemed so far out of reach to me – college was that thing that other SMART people did with their lives.

After Ms. Zink's last threat, I applied for that job. Never looking back, I spent four years in her writing center; working, writing, videotaping, talking, reading, presenting, a relentless demand to be engaged with tutoring, with writing, but mostly with tutoring writing. I loved every minute of it. I loved it so much that when I transferred to a four year, I worked in that writing center and when I transferred to a master's program I worked in that writing center. I worked in all three at the same time. Tutoring made me be purposeful, to think metacognitively about what I did and why I did it, allowed me to overhear other writers explain their process, their knowledge of rules, their reasons for writing such as they did. I was challenged. I was

successful. I had found my bliss.

I am neither the first nor the last tutor to feel this way.

As the director of the JCCC Writing Center, I tutor only on occasion but I still love it. I still get chills when a furrowed-brow student turns to look at me and disbelievably says, “is that all there is to it? Really?” – I love watching the brow smooth, the deep slow sigh of relief as he executes the writing task before him, by himself, slowly turning away from me, focused on the page. I always hate interrupting that moment to ask – anything more? No? Did I help? and the response, “yes, thank you,” before I walk back to my office to complete the paused paperwork.

My professionalization did not prepare me for the joy that comes from training tutors. Watching them move from novice to proficient to paraprofessional is just as rewarding. Yet not many in my field talk about it. We instead discuss pedagogy, ethics, politics of writing and writing center work. And like many teachers, I exact from my tutors the same as my first writing center director, Ms. Zink did with me. In their very first semester, tutors must

- read theory
- videotape tutor sessions
- write reflections on their practice from that video
- research a topic of their choosing
- present on that topic
- write further reflections using that new theoretical frame
- attend 16 weeks of 2-hour tutor training sessions

I sometimes feel guilty for requiring so much – tutors are students first. They have academic obligations and a heavy financial investment in those studies. But this job is the only job they will ever have in which they get paid to learn, pick what they want to learn, are expected to continue learning, perform practical application, and everybody benefits from the learning. Hughes, Gillispie and Kail (2010) argue that the “act of peer tutoring is a form of liberal education in which deep learning endures long after tutoring” (“What They Take” 37). The skills they acquire contribute to their lifelong

learning while helping them be better students: the deliberative aspects of tutoring helps frame critical thinking whether it be for writing, discussion or building confidence.

So, it should never come as a surprise when I read a reflection that says this: "Every day I feel like I am learning something useful. Often, when I go to class, I leave and feel like I gained nothing beside attendance points. But when I tutor someone, I gain knowledge about the English language, about how to explain things, how to help, overcome fears, how to be encouraging and often I learn quite a few things from the subject of the writer's paper."

(Fall tutor 2013)

And yet, each and every time, I am both surprised and pleased.

The following are little, sometimes big, discoveries we have learned while tutoring. I hope you enjoy.

Joyfully,

Kathryn Byrne

associate professor, Writing Center director

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# Difference of Dynamics: The Role of Authority in Supplemental Instruction Tutoring



Ben Orman

Throughout our lives we are taught to respect authority. We should obey our parents, respect our bosses, and adhere to the law. Perhaps one of the most prevalent models of this authoritarian influence is in schools. From a young age, students learn to bestow teachers with the utmost esteem. This taught reverence for authority has been deemed appropriate for the secondary level because a teachers' responsibility is to prepare students for exams, the next grade level and frequent standardized testing; however, when students progress to the post-secondary level, a shift occurs from the teachers' responsibility to the students' responsibility. As Sally Lipsky notes, "at the postsecondary level, students are considered to be independent adults responsible for their own education" (2). With this shift of responsibility shifts also authority.

Perhaps due to this transfer of responsibility, many students seek help in the form of college resources, especially peer tutors. As the name implies, these individuals are fellow students, usually undergraduates trained to assist their peers in a specific discipline. Colleges and universities have invested in peer-assistance programs for decades, with new ideas, precepts and uses of peer

tutoring always developing. One of these developments is supplemental instruction tutoring, commonly referred to as SI. The basic premise of SI tutoring is to assist students in “high-risk” courses, that is core courses in which the average grade falls in the D-F range, or the withdrawal rate averages above 30 percent. By placing an SI tutor who has previously demonstrated academic success in that course or an equivalent class (Blanc et al. 81) and having them model good student behaviors and practices, the students are better able to acquire course content and assimilate their expected curriculum. This student-tutor attends all classes, demonstrates “good” student behavior, participates in class activities, and organizes weekly study group meetings. In those meetings, the SI provides study techniques and encourages collaborative, peer learning to increase the likelihood of success.

Due to SI tutors’ roles in and out of the classroom, students easily categorize them as authority figures – teachers of sorts. This authoritarian title is, however, both misleading and inappropriate. Though SI tutors aim to increase students’ competency and comprehension, SI tutors are not authorities, for their purpose is not to teach course material, but rather to teach through demonstration the skills that “good” independent students possess. Tutors establish peer-to-peer relationships to create a positive collaborative student-learning environment that establishes a sense of belonging which differs from the traditional classroom experience.

One of the most significant differences between class sessions and SI sessions is the arrangement of space. Traditionally, teachers stand in front of a class and convey information to students through lectures while students sit face forward (Duke 399). This establishes a hierarchical structure minimizing time for student-to-student interaction and participation, while also asserting the teacher’s authority – whether intentional or not (Weaver & Qi 573). To minimize this potential authoritarian effect during SI sessions, tutors physically associate themselves with the students; by doing so, students are more likely to perceive SI tutors as “one of them” or “just another student” – a vital component of the SI model. One of the most frequently recommended ways to achieve this is by arranging desks in a

circle. Though this change might seem minute, it expresses “openness, respect, and equality” (573). A circular arrangement, however, may occasionally be awkward or difficult, as was the case in my SI sessions. To ensure that fellow students viewed me more as a student than an authority, I frequently sat at an empty desk or on the tables with the other students. Initially, the students insisted on positioning themselves towards wherever I was sitting, as if waiting for instruction, but with time, they began to turn to each other for communication and assistance. Much like the idea of positioning in a traditional tutoring session, this sign of collaboration and unity between the tutor and the students shows that the SI tutor is both involved in and part of the group – a pivotal aspect of minimizing the authoritarian status.

Additionally, the way in which SI tutors structure activities can significantly reduce the role the tutor plays during SI sessions, thus reducing an authoritarian status while amplifying collaborative activities. Grouping students allows them to interact, to test their knowledge and to learn to use their best resource: each other. Learning how to learn collaboratively allows students to act as the initial “gatekeeper” of information, a role typically reserved for teachers. The students must “teach” and explain the information to their peers, which places more responsibility on the students while decreasing the SI tutor’s perceived authority. I often use group activities for a variety of topics, and witnessed success in most cases for several reasons. First, collaborative learning forces students to consider their peers’ opinions and use their critical thinking skills to analyze their options; without a teacher to “lead” them to the correct answer, the students must find another way to understand and apply information on their own. Additionally, those students who feel they have a strong understanding of the topic can further their knowledge by explaining the subject to their peers. This was the case with one of my students, Nancy\*. She clearly demonstrated her knowledge of the course material on several occasions; therefore, in order to keep her engaged and challenged, I placed her in groups that could use some additional assistance. Although this was occasionally a challenge, Nancy helped her peers understand the material and was able to test her comprehension

through the clarity of her explanations. Finally, group activities promote a sense of community among the students, placing less of an emphasis on the SI tutor. As my group of students grew more comfortable with each other, their fear of taking risks and making mistakes significantly decreased (qtd. in Hawkins 29-30). This change in group-dynamic considerably improved the learning atmosphere for the students, which undoubtedly led to a higher engagement rate than earlier in the semester. Though collaborative learning occurs in the typical classroom, the combination of these factors in the SI setting provide for a learning experience that is peer-to-peer focused, causing the SI tutor to have a reduced level of perceived authority.

When used appropriately, collaboration and spatial arrangement can promote active learning, one of the major advantages of SI. As aforementioned, traditional college classes are frequently based on low-interaction lectures – a method that tries to convey substantial amounts of information to a large group of students in a relatively short span of time. SI, however, seeks to improve student competency and comprehension through application and participation, for “active involvement in class facilitates critical thinking” as well as “the retention of information that might otherwise be lost” (qtd. in Weaver and Qi 570). This combination results in a learning environment that relies on the students’ knowledge, not the SI tutor’s and – the higher the student participation, the less authoritarian the SI tutor becomes.

Granted, this goal is easier said than done because students are not always willing to participate, especially in the beginning of the semester. To address this issue, tutors encourage interaction and participation through nondirective means; this methodology includes techniques such as redirecting a question to another student and assigning various “jobs” to students during activities. By using nondirective methods, SI tutors act as “facilitators of student-discovery rather than embodiments of fixed knowledge” (Clark 33). This facilitation aims to increase student involvement and places the focus on the students’ thinking processes, thus further contributing to the difference between teacher and SI tutor.

Looking back through the semester, I realize that the role that student

participation played is quite evident. Fortunately, the vast majority of my students were not overly apprehensive or timid to participate; in fact, at times they seemed a bit too loquacious and comfortable with each other. Still, a few students did not enjoy participating, for English was not their native language; they had difficulty with social interaction different from their cultures, or they simply did not want to. In order to elicit some form of participation, I used several strategies depending on each student. One student, Ryan\*, consistently came to SI and clearly paid attention to every activity, but he did not participate voluntarily. To encourage his participation, I assigned various responsibilities to him. Some days he was designated the "scribe," others he was a group presenter. These responsibilities allowed Ryan to participate in the session and take on an active role in the learning process. As the semester progressed, Ryan started to express his thoughts more openly, first in his group, then to the whole, during class. Much to his apparent surprise, his answers were frequently correct, and by the end of the semester, he became an asset in group work and games.

Creating a distinction between teacher and SI tutor is critical in order to assist students in building relationships, creating a sense of community, and developing valuable study habits. However, students will always view SI tutors with some degree of authority simply because we are tutors, we know what we are doing, or so it seems. Furthermore, as Peter Carino writes, "to pretend that there is not a hierarchical relationship between tutor and student is a fallacy" (98). Though claiming that SI tutors hold no authority would be untrue; yet, we, as SI tutors, should make a conscious effort to minimize our authoritarian influence and be what we are: one of them.

\* Names have been changed.

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# It Takes Two to Tutor Experiment

Cooper Lockman



Writing abilities build up from a frustrating combination of information and practice. Just think of the knowledge required to read a sentence. Now, just think of the knowledge required to write a sentence. Supposed prodigies aside, writers are not born. Tutors, then, play a special role in the act of writing. For many students, the gap between being able to read and being able to write is vast. Even more, the identity of being a strong writer versus identifying a strong paper creates even more confusion, a larger gap. For tutors, the goal is to somehow bridge the gap between helping students finish papers and actually helping students become stronger writers. I have personally found *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT) useful in navigating this breach. When we apply the basic concepts of *SDT* to tutoring, tutors have more efficacy in the long-term when helping to facilitate students toward improvement as writers, student writers who learn to face tasks using self-initiative. But, tutoring requires the presence of two: the student to do the work, and the tutor to guide the student with composition rules, tips and strategies. Tutoring accomplishes nothing if the tutor acts alone.

Motivation stands out as a subject of central importance in education. *SDT* can be understood as a process of inspiring healthy motivation in students. The developers of the theory, psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, claim motivation is either *externally* or *internally* driven. The prior focuses only on temporary, reward-based goals, and the latter focuses on self-improvement and permanent results. In college writing especially, some

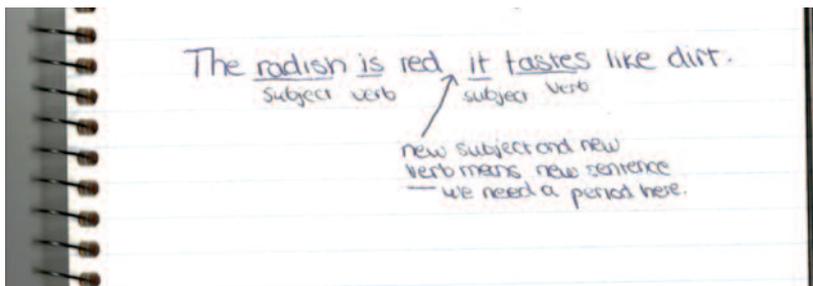
students only care about getting the paper 'done,' in as short of time as possible. Studies have shown, however, the superiority of internal motivation in producing superior students, students motivated to move toward self-improvement and learning for the sake of learning, end up not only performing better in school but also functioning as better-rounded, healthy adults (Deci & Ryan 183). Learning produces and sustains self-respect, a stronger sense of identity.

How do tutors inspire *internal* motivation over external motivation in the Writing Center? The answer arises in basic human needs. SDT assumes students have certain needs, certain conditions needing to be met, before *internal* motivation can bloom. These needs are *competence*, *autonomy* and *relatedness*. When these simple needs are satisfied, "optimal functioning" tends to occur (Deci et al. 183). *Competence* means establishing that the student is capable of tackling the task at hand: Tutors communicate to the student writer that he or she is able to write; tells them writing is not impossible. *Autonomy* means letting the student take on the work largely by themselves: the student needs to climb the hill to gain self-esteem and grow as an individual and learner. The concept of *relatedness*, which means connecting with another on a human level; for the tutor, instead of being distant grammarians, we should strive to make tutoring sessions more human and less robotic. These needs fuel the *internal* motivation students require to be successful in college (Walsh).

Because *SDT* emphasizes students as individuals, some might wonder how far a tutor should go to point students in the right direction. The theory does not preclude some directive guidance – sometimes, the tutor needs to make a concession and point out a misplaced comma. However, even directive guidance can be reformulated into being facilitative. Let me describe a hypothetical tutoring session, and how I would approach the session using *SDT*:

Sally arrives at the Writing Center with a paper drowning in run-on sentences. Once relatedness is established through small talk and nonverbal communication, I assure her she is capable of overcoming all writing-related difficulties, and she should not sell herself short. Now she is realizing

competence. But Sally has a difficult time knowing what she needs to improve in the paper. Although she has read her sections of the paper aloud, she does not (and seemingly cannot) identify the run-on sentences. Rather than directly marking errors with a pen, I take a separate sheet of paper and write an original example of a run-on sentence.



I explain the grammatical rule behind the example. I then ask her to apply to her paper what I have just explained. When she does begin going through and discovering run-ons, she feels autonomy. In my two years as a tutor, this style of refashioning the directive into the facilitative has rarely failed me.

The self-respect gained from *SDT*-style tutoring sessions travels well beyond the doors to the Writing Center. When students find *ability* within themselves instead of in tutors or professors, they have developed a self-determination no one can take away from them. After all, what does it matter (in the grand scale of things) if students merely finish papers? Tutors do not exist to speed along a blind process of churning out finished assignments; tutors exist to balance out information and practice for students. More than every finished paper, more than every grade received in college, what truly matters is the journey from relative inexperience to a comprehensive knowledge that manifests in independence. Tutors are so much more than editors, and students are so much more than mice running through a maze – college is *the* invaluable time to gain knowledge and confidence in a world where, let us admit, few people are lucky enough to have the luxury of self-improvement and learning. *SDT* makes for better tutors, better students and better human beings.

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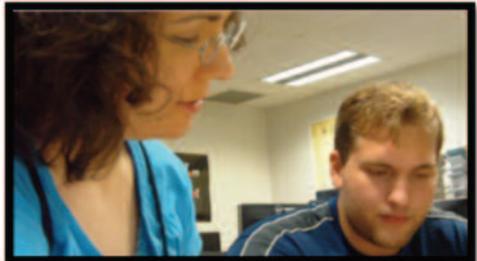
# Guiding Students Through the Hierarchy of Concerns

Ellen Brewer



When I first considered the position of peer tutor, I imagined that the role would be a very proactive one; I thought that a tutor would spend most of the tutoring session telling students why their content and organization were weak, or why commas are necessary to separate items in a list. I imagined that the situation would be very similar to the position of a teacher, taking the lead in showing students their errors so that they could fix them for a subsequent draft. I soon learned, however, that while tutors should sometimes be directive in pointing out obvious difficulties in a paper, ideally a peer tutor facilitates learning by giving students guideposts to understand and correct their own work. As researchers Frey and Reigeluth said, "Tutoring can provide instruction that is . . . individualized and interactive" (3).

Furthermore, as researchers Harris and Silva observe, "A major goal of a tutor is to help students find their own solutions" (532-533). This quote particularly resonated with me when I was researching my first semester presentation on strategies for tutoring ESL students. Research on this topic helped me to find the fine line between teaching and facilitating learning, not just with ESL students, but with students from all abilities and backgrounds. As I quickly learned, the tutorial code of the hierarchy of concerns, which emphasizes that attention to the organization and content of



a paper comes before in-depth attention to grammar and sentence-level problems, lends itself as a foolproof guide in accomplishing this. Along with asking open-ended questions, adherence to the hierarchy allows the tutor to keep the focus on helping students become better writers, whether they are native English speakers or not.

My second recorded session, about seven weeks after I started tutoring, provided an excellent opportunity to put this into practice. In this session, I made sure to concentrate on higher orders to get to the heart of the assignment goals, with which the student was struggling. He had written three pages expressing just his personal thoughts on the general research topic, without any outside sources, only to find himself very confused about what to do next. Since he was very interested in the topic, I started by asking him how he wanted to narrow that topic to a specific focus that could be expressed in one sentence. After he determined what area of the topic he wanted to cover, I explained the importance of using the JCCC library databases to find sources that could work together to develop that thesis. Although we did not move beyond understanding and planning the basics of his assignment, this session was a necessary step to give the student the knowledge and confidence to tackle his paper. As such, this session reflected the importance of empowering students through concentrating on higher order concerns.

While working on higher order concerns is important for every tutoring session, with ESL students, this emphasis is even more necessary. To a new tutor, it can be very easy to concentrate heavily on grammatical difficulties, which ESL students are still learning, while forgetting that content is always the first concern. As Harris and Silva say, when working with ESL students, tutors would do well to “focus on one or two salient difficulties, the things that strike the tutor as most problematic for the reader . . . Going this slowly . . . is more likely to facilitate real learning and writing improvement over time.” (532). In my third videotaped session, this time with an ESL student, the decision to concentrate on higher order concerns was even easier because the student was going to use Editor after our session, which would direct him to grammatical and sentence-level difficulties. As we read his paper, I asked him to concentrate on listening to the words so that he could notice anything that did not work. After only the first paragraph, he interrupted the reading and told me his thesis seemed to “stink.” The assignment required him to define the

personality and character he wanted to have, but his thesis contained nothing but vague phrases. I recommended that he come up with some descriptive adjectives to name those desired characteristics, and he understood immediately. "Oh," he said, "I should narrow it for the reader?"

As we continued to read his paper, I told him that his vivid retelling of some childhood incidents was excellent and provided good examples for his thesis. However, I observed that he needed to explain exactly how several of the incidents were significant to his character and thus deserved inclusion in this essay. Each time I pointed out one of these examples, I gave him time to respond, and he replied with detailed ideas on how to explain his thoughts.

Letting the student take the lead in correcting the errors that we saw was very important. Harris and Silva's research findings gave me the encouragement to remain attentive to the tutee's learning style and to guide him when necessary, while allowing him plenty of time to give me feedback on how he intended to strengthen his paper. As they write, "the writing center philosophy [is] that what we do particularly well in the tutorial setting is to help writers develop strategies individually matched to their own preferences and differences" (Harris and Silva 532).

Finally, in my most recently videotaped session, I kept this idea in mind as I worked again with an ESL student. She was writing a five-page expository research paper on sleep disorders and came ready to overhaul her draft. As usual, she was concerned about "grammar": once again, though, I made sure she understood that we would focus on higher-order concerns first, even though we would certainly work on recurring errors.

As it turned out, this tutee's grammar and sentence-level problems were minor and infrequent. We concentrated instead on her thesis, which was a direct quote. I emphasized that she needed to have her own words in the thesis: this is her paper, after all, even though it is a research paper. In addition, she and I had both observed that some sections of her paper had inadequate development, and we discussed where and how she could add further content. Finally, we did work on some sentence-level difficulties; when reading the paper, we both noticed that the exact sentence structure was used several times, with certain phrases repeated. Since she was uncertain how to correct

this, I took some time explaining how to work on rephrasing and rearranging similar information and I gave her specific examples how to do it. Ultimately, she did not change any of her words, but instead adjusted their placement and/or their forms in particular sentences.

The structure of this tutoring session nicely illustrates that going through a paper with the student, pointing out snags and then giving specific examples of how to correct them, allows the student to maintain ownership of their work and to work on difficulties with guidance. As before, maintaining an adherence to the hierarchy of concerns further helped this student to know exactly what she should concentrate on correcting (the thesis and development before the repetitive sentence structure concern). As Harris and Silva observe, "Those who deal with ESL writers might find it helpful . . . to . . . write in stages, e.g., focusing on content and organization in one draft and focusing on linguistic concerns in another subsequent draft" (529).

With the hierarchy of concerns as a blueprint, tutors have a strong basis with which to frame tutoring sessions. No matter their language backgrounds or skill levels, students benefit from having this concrete plan to help organize their assignments. Tutors who combine this hierarchy of concerns with an understanding and receptive ear can create tutorials that help students help themselves.

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# Supplemental Instruction: Unmeasured Success

Jane Blakeley



According to learning theorist Lev Vygotsky, “what [a student] is able to do in collaboration today, he [or she] will be able to do independently tomorrow” (211). In peer (one-to-one) tutoring, we, the tutors, strive for learners to become independent and competent at various writing tasks. Similarly, supplemental instruction tutoring (SI) seeks to “[increase] academic performance and retention through its use of collaborative learning strategies,” eventually moving these “freshmen” students toward being competent, independent learners (Arendale 11). The tutor attends every class and holds a study session each week, focusing on study strategies for class material (11). Much in the same way that a grammar rule is explained in the context of an essay, study strategies are anchored in course content; by marrying the two – study strategies and class material – application is direct, “resistance to [learning] study skills and habits” decreases, and practice for the “theoretical knowledge” of study skills is clear (Martin; Yuksel). JCCC’s SI program attempts to follow through with this structure, spanning several subjects (“Achieving the Dream”).

However, the JCCC reading and writing SI program differs in one significant way from David Arendale’s original framework. While Arendale purports that SI can be adapted to meet the criteria of nearly any class, he argues that the program is particularly ineffective in developmental courses (13). The reading and writing SI classes at JCCC, however, are just that – developmental, or prerequisite, for many traditional freshman courses. And there is a great need

for help in developmental courses – just 20 percent of students placed in the lowest developmental writing class and 16 percent in the lowest developmental reading class “complete the [developmental] sequence successfully within three years” (“Achieving the Dream”).

Part of the reason Arendale makes the claim that SI is ineffective in developmental courses perhaps stems from the limits of the outcome variables being measured in much of the research; most SI data measures “success” of an SI program with GPA and student retention, matriculation and attrition. While measurement of these discrete variables is vital, Arendale’s approach leaves other outcome measures like “sense of community” and “cognitive and social skill development,” relatively untouched. Debatably, development of a sense of belonging and these “soft skills” are of at least equal importance in developmental courses because they have implications not only for students’ educational careers but for their lives in general (Martin et al. 16-18; U.S. Dept. of Labor). Thus, even if developmental courses do not meet the traditional measures of success, these courses are likely making great progress in unmeasured arenas. In my short year of experience, I have seen regular attendees of SI sessions grow by leaps and bounds, even if this simply means they are better able to communicate, relate to their peers or understand how college classes work.

#### SENSE OF COMMUNITY

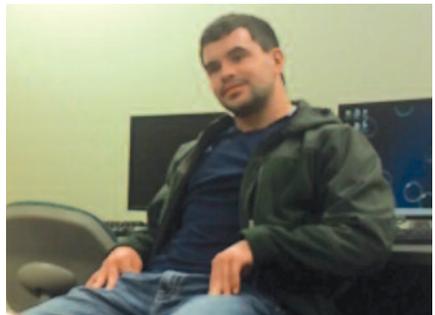
Perhaps one of the most important features of any college class or campus is the “sense of belonging” they imbue. The “subjective sense of identification and affiliation with the [college]” is highly correlated with student satisfaction and retention, and is, therefore, vital to both students and the institution at large (Hoffman et al. 228). Arguably, fostering a sense of belonging is yet more critical among students in developmental classes because these students will spend more time in school in order to graduate. And, like many student involvement programs, SI aims to nurture a sense of community and belonging by bringing students together for a common goal. In SI sessions, students work collaboratively with their peers to find answers and understand course content, encouraging group unity and success. For

example, in my SI sessions, I chose to use games (like Jeopardy) to reinforce class information and encourage each team to help each other find the correct answers. Often, competition became somewhat fierce, and students developed a competitive bond with their team, identifying with their team name and teammates. Further, not only have students in my peers' and my SI sessions increased their interaction, but according to one group of attendees, the smaller group setting "helps [them] to feel more comfortable asking each other questions" and "showing [other students] how to do something." In short, they felt more connected to each other, and hopefully to the school while garnering collaborative learning skills.

However, much of the qualitative student response to SI thus far has centered on how helpful the tutor was (i.e. – "He helped me understand the writing process"), explaining little about how comfortable these students felt on campus versus those who did not attend SI ("JCCC Dream").

## SOCIAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Developing a sense of community among students is paramount to success, but if these students do not have the requisite education-related social skills coming into the class, this task may be exceedingly difficult. Further, for many freshman college students (whether traditional or nontraditional), depending on peers or peer groups is not necessarily a natural inclination, though interacting with peers – rather than relying on an authority to simply reveal the answer – can be enormously beneficial, helping them to become more mature learners ("Collaborative Learning"; Kagan). A group of students will know more collectively than any one individual, regardless of the undoubtedly mixed abilities of the contributing members (Kagan 12). Thus, in SI, we seek to encourage collaboration with peers and, through this channel, social skill development in an academic context. In my SI sessions, I choose to employ both small group work and "rebounding" of questions, returning questions



asked of me back to the group. By forcing the group to interact with one another, those students can become accustomed to relying on their peers for information, rather than simply guessing or relying on an “authority” to know the answer.

Anecdotally, in the fall semester, I observed that students who had once refrained from speaking began to compare homework answers and socialize with each other, uninitiated, before class, demonstrating a mutually beneficial social competence. Further, data from previous semesters suggest that nearly half of all students who had an SI tutor “worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments” and “discussed ideas from [the] readings or classes with other [students] outside of class (“JCCC Dream”). When comparative data (developmental, non-SI courses) is gathered, it seems likely that the evidence may suggest SI does indeed help develop both a sense of community and course-associated social skills.

#### METACOGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Despite the lack of data, one “soft skill” that seems to have clearly emerged over the course of each semester is an SI group’s metacognitive abilities. Development of this ability is important because individuals who are adept at “thinking about thinking” often “perform better on exams and complete work more efficiently ... [They] think through a problem ... select appropriate strategies, and make decisions about a course of action to resolve the problem” (“Fact Sheet”). Thus, not only do students increase educational efficacy, but they gain valuable decision making skills that spill into both personal and professional contexts.

Metacognitive ability is taught in the classroom, but it is reinforced in SI sessions. In one of the first sessions held during a semester, my fellow tutors and I discuss learning styles (visual, auditory or kinesthetic) with attendees and brainstorm which study strategies will best fit each learner (Kagan). By doing so, each student can become aware of his/her own learning type and can customize strategies to maximize learning and minimize study time. Further, many tutors, including myself, also spend a good deal of time asking students why questions (i.e. – “Why do you believe this answer is correct?”).

This forces students to consider their thinking process and to find support for their answer (often in the class' text). Finally, at the end of the semester, my fellow tutors and I ask the SI group to begin planning their own study sessions.

And, in this last semester, my SI groups' ability to plan activities for the following week was exciting. Planning a study session demonstrates the group's (and the individuals that comprise it) metacognitive dexterity and ability to marry "'how to learn' with 'what to learn'" (Martin). First, my SI study group discussed how one plans for events in general and related this to how one might plan a study session. The group then decided to study word parts via categorization (synonyms, antonyms, word parts relating to the body, etc.) and review textbook material via student presentation. In the following week, the group was able to successfully follow through with their plan. Though I facilitated the activities, the students were highly engaged both with the content and each other. During the textbook review, two small groups each defined four patterns of organization in their own words and came up with an example sentence using a key word. The group was also able to sort word parts in logical categories.

Additionally, by the end of each semester, the same students were able to explain why they believed an answer was correct, arguing effectively for their point of view, were better able to predict test questions, and developed effective personal study methods. These students were able to gain and demonstrate metacognitive ability over the course of a semester.

## CONCLUSION

Certainly, more research is needed. At the moment, much of the SI research at JCCC has centered on traditional measures of success and the qualitative helpfulness of the SI tutor. In future, data regarding how SI has affected students' likelihood to form a study group, how connected they feel to the college (sense of belonging) as a result of the class or SI, and further retention and matriculation rates will be crucial to understanding SI's effect in developmental writing and reading courses. With continued data gathering and larger sample sizes, JCCC will undoubtedly find support for the

high efficacy of developmental courses.

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# Removing the Editor: Going Beyond the Rules and Into the Exception

Laura Grayson



English is a language full of exceptions: “‘l’ before ‘e’ except after ‘c’, or when sounded like ‘a’ as in ‘neighbor’ or ‘weigh’, and more. Almost every rule has at least one exception, and sometimes the exceptions can be hard to keep track. But English is also a language full of options. Because of its accumulative etymology, English has adapted a sort of duality that continues to absorb new words until every sentence can be said a dozen different ways and still convey the same. As tutors, our job is to reinforce these rules and show students the distinctions between options in different situations. Part of being a writer is developing a pattern and cohesive rhythm to word choice that reflects the author’s voice. Still, when a student looks to me to explain to rules and options of what should or should not be and why, I find it difficult to explain why I can’t.

Our biggest rule in the writing center is that we do not edit. Instead of just correcting mistakes, we want to show the students how to recognize those mistakes and then correct them on their own. As Muriel Harris said in *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*, the goal is to get the students to “reformulate the principle for themselves in terms that they are comfortable with” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 53). Grammar rules are complicated, and unless the student can fully understand what they mean, they will continue to make the same mistakes. So a good tutor explains rules, but encourages the students to find examples of the rule in their paper, correct or not, so that they truly recognize it. The tutor asks questions that lead to

the right answers, and soon the student feels a more personal sense of accomplishment (Ryan and Zimmerelli 53).

When I first started tutoring at the writing center, I believed that this would be most of what I'd be doing – teaching grammar and showing students all the rules and tricks that I know to structure and get through writing a paper. But what I didn't expect, was that, more than editing, students would want rules and guidelines for all possibilities, a formula they can reproduce by a yes or no answer to every possible choice. Part of editing is judging the way that writers choose to present their information, telling them that they shouldn't use clichés or that a certain sentence would sound better with "which" instead of "that." Edits like that are common, but what a writer sometimes forgets is that we can ignore these little instances if we wish.

Student writers will often point out places in their papers where the wording trips them up or doesn't feel right, and they'll ask me what should be there. Usually I'll answer, "you could word it this way or this way, depending on how you want it to come across." To which they'll invariably say, "but which one is right?"

They're both right.

I could give advice about the connotations of different words or phrases and how they work along with what the student has ... but I don't at all want them taking my offerings as law. So I'll hedge by telling them what each option will say to the reader, and asking them to choose. Still, it doesn't feel like I've imparted real knowledge. What can I say to show them just how much power they have with these words? I honestly haven't figured out the answer yet. I could probably teach an entire class on how changing a single word can change the meaning of a whole paragraph, but it wouldn't work so well in a tutoring session. Or perhaps, that is my next strategy?

This particular problem seems like an issue that would only appear in creative writing. The kind of writing where authors can use fragments and colloquialisms and any kind of punctuation they feel fits the mood of the piece. Academic papers have moods and voices too. At a certain point, my commenting can get very close to writing parts of the paper for the student,

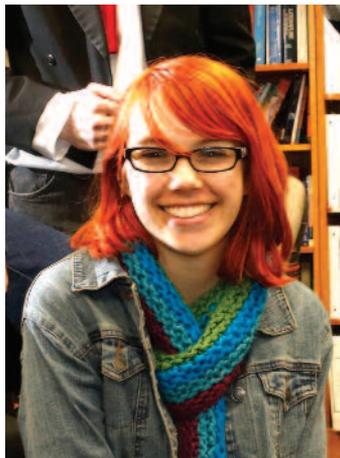
writing in my voice. Which, I'm sure, many student writers would prefer. Still, more than giving rules, tutoring is showing students that they have control over rules, over voice, over ideas. If I could find the way to properly teach that, then I believe that student writers would have so much more confidence in themselves, and it would show in their writing. They might even enjoy putting together a paper and controlling what the reader will take from it. That's certainly something I've always liked about writing. Now, to pass it on.

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# The Dungeon That Was Not

Megan Gladbach



A musky dust suffocates my nostrils, and a cold draft raises goose bumps up and down my arms. The dark, heavy walls cause the room to slowly cave-in. A lonely plant is wilting beside the closed curtains of the window. I have just entered a Writing Center.

“What do you want?” asks a cranky woman sitting behind the cluttered front desk. “Um, I ... Is this the writing center?” I stammer. “Yeah, obviously,” snaps the lady. Though I try to compose myself, I continue to stumble over my words, “Um ... can I ... uh ... I mean ... I need some help with my paper, but I...” I am interrupted by a squawk from the woman again, “Well, what is it? Spit it out!” As I slowly back away from the dungeon, I utter, “Uh ... never mind, I’ll come back later.” However, I never return.

Fortunately, this is only a fictional story and never actually happened to me. But what if it had? What if this story I shared wasn’t just a hypothetical situation? Most likely, not very many readers of this short example would have come to visit the JCCC Writing Center. Luckily, Johnson County Community College’s Writing Center is nothing like the horrific scene I created. I promise. At JCCC, the physical and social environments positively affect both those who visit the Writing Center and those who work in the Writing Center.

As a tutor, it is important for me to make the writer feel comfortable by introducing myself, sitting side-by-side, and dressing and speaking casually.

The combination of these small actions creates an environment where I am “an ally, not an authoritarian figure who dispenses advice from behind a desk” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 18). A person’s first time going into the Writing Center to have a paper critiqued can be a nerve-wracking experience; however, entering a room “furnished with plants, bright posters, comfortable chairs and tables instead of desks” (17) can reduce a writer’s anxiety significantly. A fresh, clean workplace gives students a healthy environment where they feel welcomed not intimidated.

In addition to feeling relaxed, a healthy environment allows students to better focus to accomplish tasks. The report, *Environmental Impact on Student Learning*, explains, “[a] good learning environment frees students from physical distress, makes it easy for students to concentrate on school work and induces students in logical thinking. Students in good learning environment[s] undoubtedly attain higher achievement” (Chan). This kind of accomplishment will raise a student’s confidence. In other words, the better he or she feels about him or herself, the more progress he or she will make.



The physical and social environment not only plays a major role in the minds of students who visit the Writing Center but also in the minds of the tutors and faculty members who work in the Writing Center. In my personal experience, the atmosphere of the Writing Center has allowed me to be patient and pleasant with others, which in turn, has enabled me to give students much more effective tutoring sessions. When I enter an environment where I can think clearly, adapting is much easier for me. I can leave my personal problems at home, bring my attention to tutoring and give positive and constructive criticism.

In some sense, a positive environment is actually more crucial for the tutor

than the student since the tutor is ultimately the one who controls the social environment (Bailey). For example, if I worked in an environment where I constantly felt tense, my feelings would reflect in my actions. Rather than support and assuage an anxious writer, I could potentially cause the writer more anxiety. Being aware that “although no tutor can directly change the physical environment, apart from strategically selecting locations that might afford more comfort, better lighting etc., [tutors] do have control over the atmosphere they help establish for the students they assist” (Bailey). This awareness of control by my attitude is crucial because it allows tutors to facilitate much more successful tutoring sessions.

Those who work in JCCC’s Writing Center make a great effort for it to be a place where students can write comfortably and confidently. “It is not by accident that many writing centers appear welcoming and friendly” (Ryan and Zimmerelli 17). Inspirational posters hanging on the walls cheer students. Hundreds of handy, easy-to-use English and writing guides are organized on shelves so as not to be overwhelming but only available. Best of all, smiling tutors look forward to seeing writers succeed. I have experienced the amiable surroundings of the Writing Center myself as a writer and I can honestly say, “I love my job.” However, answering the question, “Why do you love your job?” is still a little difficult for me. Maybe one small part of the answer lies in the Writing Center’s pleasing environment.

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## Reflection on S.I.

Taylor Kelley

Throughout this semester, S.I. has been both challenging and exciting. Where I used to have six to eight students, I now find myself in weekly sessions with only one or two. This lack of participation can be frustrating at times because I don't feel that I am meeting the collaborative goal of S.I.; however, I have come up with a few strategies in order to continue promoting what we successfully do in study group.

This semester has been a new challenge for me. Last semester I was still dipping my toes in the water just to figure out S.I. Now that I have a fairly good grasp on what I feel I should be doing, I have been presented with all new demands. The reading class I support has dwindled down to a small group of 10 students. In consequence, my S.I. sessions have only had one or two students in attendance. I have argued with myself throughout the semester just to decide if S.I. with one student is even effective. If the goal is collaborative learning, then what good is it for one student to meet with me each week?

In order to respond to this challenge, I have had to find strategies – through means of trial and error – that still worked toward promoting our collaborative learning goal. One of the successful strategies I have used in my sessions was demonstrated well in the session I filmed. The focus of this strategy is to make sure the students in my class see me as a peer facilitator of this “study group,” not an instructor. The textbook, *Academic Peer Instruction*, promotes this strategy as a key principle of our work as S.I. tutors.

The authors Zaritsky and Toce outline this principle, “The tutor in API [S.I.] is not a teacher – the class already has a teacher, but a ‘coach’ or ‘facilitator’ (7). I try to implement this principle by being involved in the activities with students during the session. If the session consists of me and one other student, I do my best to show that I am learning the information through the activities with them.

Another way I promote this goal is through my interaction with the class itself. If a test or assignment is due in class, I try to get the class to interact and communicate about it while the professor is writing the agenda on the board. At this point in the semester the students expect me to walk in class asking questions. For example, if a word parts test is near, the first thing I say when I walk in to the class is “M-A-L, -Mal,” and instantly they will respond with the definition. After that, another student picks up their paper and reads off another one. We will laugh and discuss the different word parts, and I feel it is a pretty effective form of collaboration. I am excited to see the students so driven by it.

Now that I have come up with a few strategies for dealing with the challenge of a small S.I. session, I actually feel the sessions are extremely productive – even for just one student. I hope to continue finding ways to work around new challenges because it has helped me learn and improve my skills as a tutor.

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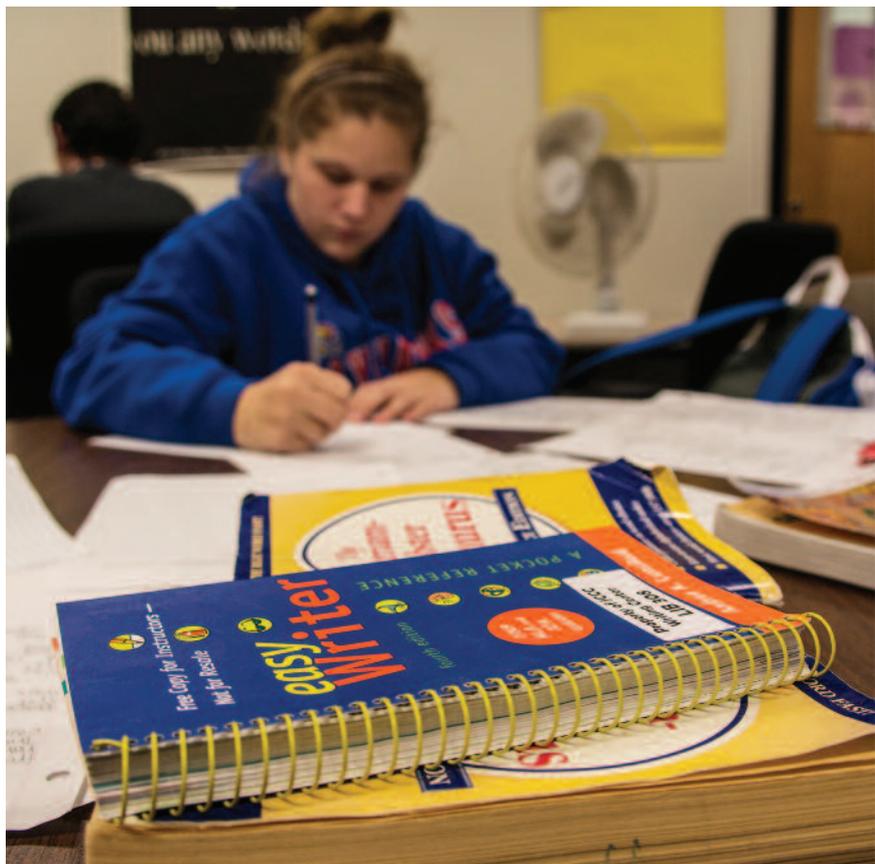
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# Teaching Freshmen

Jeff Boyer

Adjunct Professor, English, Poet, *Prairie Cure*, ©1984

My students are amazed.  
I know their every move.  
They're confused that my perception  
is a direct trunk line  
plugged into their posterred rooms –  
Snoopy dogs and genitalia.  
They can't decode my stance,  
poised between youth and age,  
nor do they notice me  
on Lookout Hill –  
the Nash Rambler  
with the seats let down,  
steadlily grinding away what was left  
of virginity,  
those years ago.  
They wince at crassness,  
and roll their eyes at eloquence.  
They think I've something to teach them,  
but doubt it's worth  
three hours a week.  
They'd take an easy "A"  
and a day off,  
for the weather.







## Associations

### **International Writing Center Association**

<http://writingcenters.org/>

### **Midwest Writing Center Association**

<http://pages.usiouxfalls.edu/mwca/>

### **National Association on Peer Tutoring in Writing**

<http://www.ncptw.chicagolandwritingcenters.org/>

### **CRLA (College Reading and Learning Association)**

<http://www.crla.net/>

## Helpful Links

### **Grammar Bytes**

<http://www.chompchomp.com/exercises.htm>

### **ONELook.com (dictionary resource)**

<http://www.onelook.com/>

## Journals and References

### **Kairos: a multimedia journal**

<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/>

### **College Composition and Communication (JCCC link)**

<http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=collcompcomm&>

### **CompPile (resource for Peer Writing Tutors)**

<http://compfaqs.org/WritingCenters/WritingCenters>

### **Writing Center Journal**

<http://casebuilder.rhet.ualr.edu/wcrp/wcjournal/search.cfm>

### **Praxis: A Writing Center Journal**

<http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/praxis/>

### **Writing Lab Newsletter**

<http://www.writinglabnewsletter.org/>

## BLOGS

### **Friends of the Writing Center Journal**

<http://writingcenterjournal.blogspot.com/>

### **IWCA Discussion Forum**

<http://www.writingcenters.org/board/index.php>

### **Peer Centered**

<http://www.peercentered.org/>

